

times more financing our debt than China and Japan together. We are playing a shell game ourselves. We are financing our own debt. And then you wonder why you have inflation.

□ 2100

And we have all been in this body, and I know there is always angst when we get near the debt ceiling, but the fact of the matter is if you take a look at the last 40 years, almost the only times we have actually had any attempt to bend the spending curve, bend the borrowing curve, bend the debt curve have been out of negotiations to raise the debt ceiling.

Budget deals, we have had a number of them. Remember the Budget Control Act and some of the others?

Now, the problem is, we have had some of these where we set base lines and they were actually sort of working, and then this place all runs away from them. But there is a fraud in those, and that was they were always tied to discretionary spending, not the mandatory that is functionally driving the debt.

Some of my brothers and sisters on the left have said, well, it was tax reform. That is just not true. If you actually look at the contributor debt, if everything from tax reform was extended permanently, it is a tiny fraction, and that is assuming without CBO—remember CBO wasn't giving us the value for all the economic growth we particularly had in 2018 and 2019. But that is not the math.

And the six major deficit reduction deals that we have had since 1983, if you take a look at them, almost all of it was under discretionary. It saved us some money in interest. We did raise some more taxes. We did a little bit in the early eighties under Ronald Reagan on mandatory Social Security, but you take a look at them, and they had a pretty darn impressive effect. Remember the surpluses in the late nineties? But today we have let it get away from us.

And you take a look at what became of the \$1.7 billion in promised—remember 2013 until this year there was supposed to be about \$1.7 trillion in functional reductions in spending? Do you remember the Budget Control Act? Except what happened?

Well, time after time both Republicans and Democrats came here and whittled it away because we wanted to spend more money, and we lost much of the value. So we did gain about a trillion dollars of savings over those 10 years. It could have been double that if we hadn't whittled it away.

The last thing, and I hope our brothers and sisters on the left will actually step up and help us on this one. The current number is actually substantially higher than this because this slide now is a couple months old, but we think we have identified over \$200 billion in functionally missed and fraudulent claims and payments during the pandemic. You have seen some of

the crazy stories of how much fraud there has been in unemployment in California.

We need to tell the truth about the healthcare costs, Medicare driving our debt. But I believe in a holistic theory. You need to go after everything. You need to go after what we know is the fraud from the last 2 years. We also need to tell the truth about bending the curve on delivering healthcare. And there are ways to do it. This place just needs to stop being so fearful of telling the truth about the debt and deficits because if we don't grow up and take this head on it is going to take our head off.

Madam Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

THOUGHTS ON ADDRESSING ECONOMIC DISPARITY

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 4, 2021, the Chair recognizes the gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. HIMES) for 28 minutes.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. HIMES. Madam Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material on the subject of this Special Order.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Connecticut?

There was no objection.

Mr. HIMES. Madam Speaker, I am delighted as chairman of the Select Committee on Economic Disparity to welcome the ranking member and the Republican appointees to this very important committee for this Special Order where I think the members of our committee are going to try to highlight some of the early and initial thoughts that we have on how we might address this issue of economic disparity.

I will note that in our first hearing one of our witnesses called this committee "a committee of historic potential." It is based on the National Economic Committee of 1938, and that committee operated in a moment of economic crisis worse than any of us have seen in our lifetimes really since the Great Depression.

The Great Depression showed America that far too many citizens of the richest and most powerful country in the world could be impoverished by unpredictable forces beyond their control.

It showed that free market capitalism was both an unparalleled engine of economic growth, and if left unregulated, subject to manipulation, indifferent to fairness, and prone to collapse as it did in the early 1930s.

In most respects, the American economy is more stable and the safety net is more robust than it was 80 years ago, but today our economy demonstrates more income and wealth disparity and less mobility than it ever has. And, Madam Speaker, that is not a red prob-

lem or a blue problem. It is not a northern or a western or an eastern problem. It affects every single one of our communities, every single one of our districts.

It is not a trivial problem. Market economies don't work if they are perceived as fundamentally unfair. Our Democratic political system rests now uneasily on the premise that every American counts equally. Economic mobility, the idea that hard work and playing by the rules allows one to climb the ladder has always been essential to our understanding of ourselves. It defines the American Dream, and yet, when my parents were born, more than 90 percent of American children could expect to make more money than their parents. Today, fewer than half the children will outearn their parents.

Madam Speaker, I see this every day at home. Some of the towns I represent in Connecticut's so-called "Gold Coast" include some of the wealthiest people on the planet, but a 15-minute drive from their neighborhoods will take them into cities with horrendous poverty and neighborhoods where opportunity is scarce at best.

Addressing that issue in a thoughtful way, in a bipartisan way is the remit of this committee.

Having made that point, before we enter into a colloquy, I yield to the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. STEIL), my friend and the ranking member of the Select Committee on Economic Disparity and Fairness in Growth to make any comments he wishes to make.

Mr. STEIL. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Connecticut for yielding.

It is great to be joining him here on the House floor to share with our colleagues the important work that lies ahead for the Select Committee on Economic Disparity and Fairness in Growth. Simply put, we will be exploring, questioning, and hearing potential ways to address economic challenges we are seeing across this country. We are, in fact, on a fact-finding mission as we search for policy solutions that create opportunity for every American.

Leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans saw progress. In 2019, the median household income grew by 6.8 percent, the largest increase ever recorded. Minority communities saw even greater growth: Blacks Hispanics, Asians, and women.

But coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, something has changed, which is why the work of this Select Committee is so timely. Labor force participation, both those seeking work and currently employed, are lows not seen since the Carter administration.

Across this country there is a growing disconnect between available jobs and workers ready to work. The government should be supporting and encouraging work and the dignity that comes with it.

Families across the country, from Kenosha to New York, San Francisco

to Orlando, are being hurt by rising prices. They feel it when they fill up their car's tank. They feel it at the grocery store. And they are scared they are going to feel it when they go Christmas shopping for their kids in a few weeks.

Inflation is a tax on every American, but it is devastating to low-income Americans.

Chairman HIMES, I look forward to working with you to explore what we can do to empower workers to prosper and to expand opportunities for all families to succeed.

□ 2110

Mr. HIMES. Madam Speaker, I thank the ranking member. We will be engaging in a colloquy, just so all the Members know. We will be having an informal chat without having recognition from the Chair.

I know that we are both anxious to get to our members and their affirmative but early ideas on what we might do here, but the ranking member and I were in Lorain, Ohio, last week, courtesy of the gentlewoman from Ohio, who we will hear from later. I think we were both struck by a couple of things.

I came away from that visit impressed by the optimism of people in a town that had suffered badly, associated with the closing of a steel mill. I came away remarkably impressed by the potential role for education. One of the best things I heard there was the amazing work that the community college of Lorain was doing, training people who had both lost jobs but also training young people.

I personally hope—and I know there is a conversation to be had about this—that training and education won't start at the community college level but will start as early as possible. I would hope that maybe education and training might be one of those areas in which we might find bipartisan agreement.

Mr. STEIL. Madam Speaker, I think there is great opportunity as it relates to education and, in particular, workforce development. I think not lost on many of us, as we look out at the disconnect between workers and jobs available, there are over 10 million jobs available across America, yet we continue to have a disconnect between getting workers who are looking for work and the jobs that are available.

We saw in Lorain, like we see in southeast Wisconsin, signs looking for workers. As we walked into the hearing, I remarked that there were "Help Wanted" signs across the street, yet there were many people who were still unemployed.

Hopefully, we can look at the workforce development aspects of education in the United States to make sure that we are connecting workers with the jobs that are available.

Mr. HIMES. Madam Speaker, that is right, I say to my friend from Wisconsin. I was startled by that sign as well. Here we are in a depressed, if optimistic, town, with a big, closed steel

mill with "Help Wanted" signs on the outside of that steel mill.

Now, there are probably lots of reasons for the current disconnect. Nationally, I think it is in the millions of jobs that are going begging, even as some people are having a hard time getting those good-paying jobs. But I was really impressed by the fact that you had in a town where there were certainly surplus workers a steel plant looking for more employees.

Mr. STEIL. Absolutely. We see this time and again in southeast Wisconsin. We see businesses that are shrinking hours to try to deal with and navigate through this challenging work environment.

I know we will be having a hearing coming up on automation, and I don't think it can be lost on us that many businesses are looking and the struggle to get workers back to work and the impact that may have on automation and future job growth in the United States.

Mr. HIMES. Madam Speaker, I thank the ranking member and look forward to working with him and his members. I know both of us feel strongly about making sure that the members of the committee have an opportunity to offer up their ideas, so I will begin. Again, the Chair won't be yielding. I will just give a wave when I think maybe time is running low.

Let me begin by inviting the gentlewoman from California, who really has already made a dramatic contribution to the committee.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from California (Ms. JACOBS).

Ms. JACOBS of California. Madam Speaker, I thank Chair HIMES for organizing this Special Order, and I say thank you to the ranking member.

I welcome our Republican colleagues to the committee. I know we are going to have some strong debates on this committee, and we should because economic inequality is the central issue of our time. It deserves all the energy and attention we can give it because we are at a pivotal moment.

Right now, the bottom 50 percent of the population holds 2 percent of the wealth in the United States. The top 1 percent holds nearly a third of all wealth.

I have some experience with that. The most consequential day of my life, the day that would determine whether or not I grew up with opportunity and privilege, was the day that I was born. That is true for so many kids in America. But unlike the majority of kids who were born in 1989, I was lucky. While some were born into generational poverty, I was born into a family of wealth. That is what I did to earn my wealth and my opportunity in life—I was born.

For decades, our policies have benefited people like me, and that has to change because, in addition to being immoral, economic inequality represents a long-term threat to our inter-

national competitiveness, our national security, and the health of our democracy.

I know my colleagues on the other side of the aisle, some of whom served with me on Armed Services, are thinking deeply about how we remain competitive in the international landscape. But with 140 million Americans who live in households that are low income, low wealth, are one crisis away from economic ruin, that is more difficult.

I represent San Diego in Congress. We are one of the wealthiest counties in the country. We have Fortune 500 companies. We have mansions on the beach. Yet, more than 40 percent of our kids were living in families experiencing poverty before the pandemic. We have to do better.

That is why I am so grateful to be on this committee and that we are taking the time to debate and negotiate the Build Back Better Act, a bill that would make historic investments to rebalance our system, especially for children.

I know our disagreements are real, but I have faith that, together, we can work to find solutions like the earned income tax credit, the child tax credit, Head Start, all of these programs that, when they were passed, had wide bipartisan support.

Madam Speaker, I again thank Chair HIMES and our Republican colleagues.

Mr. HIMES. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman from California. I take real pleasure in welcoming the gentlewoman from Oklahoma to the committee and invite her to make any remarks she would like to make.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from Oklahoma (Mrs. BICE).

Mrs. BICE of Oklahoma. Madam Speaker, I thank the chairman for yielding. It is an honor to be selected for the committee, and I look forward to working with all the members, including Ranking Member STEIL, on this very important issue.

Madam Speaker, I am honored to be selected to serve on the Select Committee on Economic Disparity, and I look forward to working with all of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to dive deep into the issues at hand and to try to find areas where we can work together to craft bipartisan solutions.

In contrast to my friend and colleague from California, I was born the daughter of an immigrant. My father came to the United States with no money in pursuit of the American Dream. He went to college, graduated, started his own business, and, today, is a very successful businessman.

I look forward to discussing in this committee the ways that we can foster the American Dream with American citizens across this country. The mission of the select committee is certainly worthy of consideration. The question of why some of our fellow Americans are being left behind in the economy demands our time and attention.

One of the most worrying economic statistics of the past year and a half is

that the U.S. labor force participation rate is the lowest it has been since 1977, nearly 45 years ago. Millions of fewer Americans are employed or actively seeking work compared to just 2 years ago, and that has created a wide-ranging challenge for American families and for our economy.

“Help Wanted” signs, as was mentioned earlier, have become ubiquitous across the Nation as stores, restaurants, manufacturers, and others struggle to find employees to continue operations. It is vital that we find the root causes and craft the appropriate solutions.

To that end, here are a few areas I think the select committee should focus its time and its energy on.

First, we should begin to review and unwind Federal policies that have disincentivized participation in the labor force, many of which were created at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, we should refocus and strengthen our Nation’s education and workforce development programs. It is clear that our Nation’s education system leaves many Americans behind, saddles students with large amounts of debt, and often promotes pricey degree programs with very poor job prospects.

I believe we need to do a better job of matching workforce development programs to the actual needs of employers. Aligning job training curriculum to meet the demands of employers who need skilled workers would almost guarantee jobs for those who complete a program.

Third, we need to reform our Nation’s criminal justice system and reinvest efforts to rehabilitate the nearly 95 percent of prisoners who will eventually be released from prison. Sadly, all too often, we hear of individuals released with just the clothes on their back and a one-way bus ticket. This level of support doesn’t set up individuals for success.

I am proud, earlier this year, the State of Oklahoma stood up a program to begin preparing inmates 9 months before their release with workforce training and assistance to obtain documentation needed to get a job, transportation, and housing. Improving programs to transition the formerly incarcerated back to society is worth our consideration and can save taxpayers in the long run.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn’t note the importance of regulatory relief and tax reform as key components to all of this. As someone who worked in the private sector for many years, including running my own firm and working for a family company, I can say with certainty that tax policy and government regulation have tremendous impacts on the decisions of businesses to hire, expand, and make investments.

In closing, I would again like to express my appreciation for being on the committee and look forward to working with my colleagues to dig deeper.

Madam Speaker, I thank Chairman HIMES and Ranking Member STEIL for organizing this Special Order this evening.

Mr. HIMES. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman from Oklahoma.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from Minnesota (Ms. CRAIG).

□ 2120

Ms. CRAIG. Madam Speaker, I am so incredibly honored to be appointed to the Select Committee studying economic disparities and fairness in growth. I welcome my Republican colleagues.

I am especially grateful to be taking a fresh look at how we build economic growth in our rural communities. The challenges facing rural America, while longstanding, have been made even more urgent as a result of the COVID-19 public health crisis. In Congress, it is our responsibility and our moral duty to respond to the unique needs of our rural communities.

Right now, in small towns across my district a lack of reliable internet access is preventing entrepreneurs from growing their small businesses. Higher insurance premiums and out-of-pocket healthcare costs are putting a strain on families’ bottom lines. Access to healthcare sometimes means driving an hour to the nearest hospital. We must enter this work with an open mind to examine the issues, and we must build a roadmap that ensures our rural communities are not left behind.

To be sure, the Build Back Better Act has many provisions designed to address growth in rural America, most notably, the President’s Rural Partnership Program, which would empower local communities to shore up unreliable electric grids, childcare, and support small businesses that power local communities.

These long overdue investments won’t reverse all of the economic decline we have seen in our rural communities, but it is a start to put into place an economic foundation that paves the way for consistent, longstanding growth that has eluded our rural communities for decades.

I came to Congress to deliver these solutions for my constituents, and now we have an opportunity to step back and examine these issues with fresh eyes. We cannot let this opportunity pass us by.

Madam Speaker, I thank the chairman for all of his work, and I appreciate the opportunity to be on this Select Committee.

Mr. HIMES. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman from Minnesota.

Madam Speaker, I am just going to note to the ranking member, I have four members, a good, enthusiastic turnout, so we are going to need to be a little disciplined with time, about roughly 2 minutes each.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. DAVIDSON).

Mr. DAVIDSON. Madam Speaker, I thank the chairman and the ranking

member, the Speaker, and the minority leader. It is nice to have this committee to focus on such an important topic and to do it in a bipartisan way. I am sure we will have our differences of opinion, but I hope we find some common ground.

Frankly, one of the bills I have worked on for a long time is the People CARE Act. It would create a bipartisan commission for Republicans, for Democrats, and it would reform all 90-plus means-tested programs. We spend about a trillion dollars a year, and for reference, we spend about \$750 billion on defense, so far more just on poverty assistance. Many of those programs aren’t as effective as they could be.

It wouldn’t cut any funding. It wouldn’t even necessarily cut any programs, but the commission could redesign them to do things like end benefit cliffs. That is really important, because as people start to recover and as they start to get back into the economy and participate in the workforce—when they get a raise, when they get a promotion, sometimes when they get a job—they get put on a cold turkey program, they lose their benefits and it creates a lot of fear, and frankly, turns a safety net into a snare.

One of the things right now that is driving the challenges for the safety net is wages are going up. Now, that doesn’t mean inflation is a good thing, by any means. Inflation is really hitting wage-earners really hard and retirees even harder, but it is changing how far a housing voucher will go, for example, or whether somebody gets a raise. They might not have updated the benefit program from the Federal safety net to recognize that and now they are facing a cliff.

We need to address the drivers of this inflation, and that goes to the destruction of the value of our money. The massive spending that we do, often in the name of compassion, is growing the wealth gap, this is fiscal and monetary policy. When we have big deficits, it grows inequality in the name of helping people.

There are so many more issues that I hope we get to, but it is an honor to serve with my colleagues and I look forward to hearing their ideas and growing from the experience.

Mr. HIMES. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Ohio for his generous comments.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from Wisconsin (Ms. MOORE of Wisconsin), another one of our stalwart midwesterners, who was with us in Lorain, Ohio.

Ms. MOORE of Wisconsin. Madam Speaker, I thank the chairman and the ranking member. I am so delighted to have been appointed to the Select Committee.

The Speaker, of course, said that we should make proposals that make our economy grow for everyone, empowering American economic growth while ensuring that no one is left behind in the 21st century economy.

It is no secret that our country is marred by unequal access to good paying jobs, healthcare, housing, high quality education, childcare, and many other things. I can't dwell on all those things in this short period of time. These disparities impact the ability of many communities to escape poverty, and especially people of color.

I do want to dwell on a couple of things, proposals that I think are extremely important to close the economic gap, the wealth gap, and the housing gap.

First of all, I think that all of our workers deserve paid family leave, a universal comprehensive paid family and medical leave program. Only about a third of Americans in the highest quintile in the country receive any kind of paid family leave, while 92 percent of workers in the lower quintile have no paid family leave.

I think that we should enhance the child tax credit and the earned income tax credits. These are things that, while there is a very high cost of poverty, there is a big, huge outcome and harvest from investing in our children. People around the globe have noted that it really creates better workers, better educational outcomes, and better healthcare outcomes.

We also need to address the uncompensated care that so many family caregivers, especially women, are providing, about a half-trillion dollars a year in uncompensated care, and we need to address that. So I think if we boost the CTC, the earned income tax credit, provide paid family leave, we will begin to see the beginnings around the edges of reducing some of the disparities.

Mr. HIMES. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman from Wisconsin.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from Florida (Mrs. CAMMACK) for her remarks this evening.

Mrs. CAMMACK. Madam Speaker, I thank Chairman HIMES and Ranking Member STEIL.

Madam Speaker, I rise today as a member of the Select Committee on Economic Disparity and Fairness in and Growth, aka, the Committee on the Economy.

Over the past few minutes, we have heard a variety of arguments, and there is absolutely no doubt that every Member here today has a vested interest in ensuring our Nation remains prosperous for generations to come.

While we may disagree on solutions, we will work together to address economic challenges that we see across this country. Economic prosperity for all Americans is imperative and we know that prior to COVID-19, Americans saw tremendous progress.

In 2019 alone, the median household income grew 6.8 percent, the largest increase ever recorded in American history. With historic legislation passed by the House of Representatives and the Trump administration, we saw minority and historically underserved

communities grow at historic rates, with income levels rising 7 percent for Hispanics and African Americans.

Following the pandemic, however, we have seen labor force participation plummet, as the policies proposed by our colleagues across the aisle have incentivized unemployment that we have not seen since the Carter administration which, for the record, was more than a decade before my time.

Now, as we begin to prepare to explore what we can do to empower workers for the jobs of the future and encourage all American families to succeed nationwide, I am particularly focused on communities like mine in north Central Florida, which lack broadband in both rural and urban areas, suffering from a lack of investment, which in turn affects our schoolchildren, telehealth opportunities, commerce, and so much more.

Now, in an agriculture-heavy district like mine, I also want to highlight the high trade deficit, the need for improved trade agreements, which help Florida producers in my home State who have consistently been devastated by lower prices from Mexico.

During the pandemic, farmers had to destroy crops and dump milk because the demand was so low, while cheaper produce from other nations continued to be imported cutting out the market from our producers. Simply put, the economics of U.S. production in agriculture are in peril.

Finally, I would like to bring attention to issues that are hot in the headlines these days: educational freedom, school choice, and the rights of parents to have a say in their children's education. We all know education is a direct correlation to prosperity. We know that America was built on equal opportunity, not equal outcome.

Rather than asking what more government should do, we should ask where government can be removed and should be removed. Federal regulations cost \$1.9 trillion, spent on reporting, compliance, and more, which could be better served in investing in employees or in workforce development or in underdeveloped communities across the country.

□ 2130

As we begin our work on this select committee, I am committed to working with my colleagues to pursue meaningful opportunities for all Americans, regardless of their location, regardless of their background, regardless of their education, and regardless of whatever box they check.

It is well past time that we stop seeing the government as the solution to our problems because, after all, it is the incredible opportunities here today in America that have allowed me, the daughter of a single mom, a young woman from rural America, who has gone from homeless to the House of Representatives in under a decade. It is time that we expand those opportunities—not restrict them.

I thank Chairman HIMES, again, as well as Ranking Member STEIL for their leadership. I am honored to serve on this select committee.

Mr. HIMES. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman from Florida. We may not totally agree on the role of government, but I am grateful to her for really highlighting the importance of education which has been the theme that we have heard a lot here tonight.

Batting cleanup, our last Member to hear from is our hostess from Lorain, Ohio.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from Ohio (Ms. KAPTUR).

Ms. KAPTUR. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman, Chair HIMES, for yielding, and I thank him for bringing the committee to Lorain, Ohio.

Madam Speaker, I rise tonight to offer my strong support for pending new investments in our workers, our families, and our communities.

As was highlighted during the hearing in Lorain, our region has been battered by an economy that rewards the 1 percent and billionaire investors at the expense of workers of the middle class. Thankfully, right now in northern Ohio we are seeing the possibility of restoring new hope and new opportunity not just for billionaires but for workers. The parents and grandparents of nearly 150,000 children from working families and struggling households in our district are seeing their taxes cut through the child tax credit.

Unlike the trillion-dollar giveaway aimed at the wealthiest and transnational corporations that outsource jobs to penny-wage nations, our hardworking families are seeing their tax dollars returned directly to them.

Looking at how working mothers struggle, a recent study from the United Way of Greater Toledo shows that more than one-third workers are not eligible for paid maternity leave. In the richest nation on Earth, our workers should have access to paid family leave that is available elsewhere on the globe. This is what we are working to deliver.

Further, significant new investments in physical infrastructure will create living wage jobs and help level the playing field as America creates new wealth beginning right where we live by rebuilding our roads, bridges, ports, and investing in renewable energies like hydrogen and electric vehicles to spur a real revival of our industrial heartland.

It is time to deal in workers and their families by rewarding hard work, not just capital. It is time to deliver for the families in Toledo, Sandusky, Lorain, and Cleveland. Investments in our workers, families, and communities will help restore faith that hard work matters. It will rebuild the middle class and provide a path to fully realize the American Dream.

Mr. HIMES. Madam Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

PROTECTING OUR VETERANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 4, 2021, the Chair recognizes the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. KELLER) until 10 p.m.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. KELLER. Madam Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that each Member may have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Pennsylvania?

There was no objection.

Mr. KELLER. Madam Speaker, my distinguished colleagues and I stand here on behalf of America's veterans. The last thing our veterans should be burdened with is any delay, let alone a prolonged wait time to access the benefits and programs they have earned through their service.

The National Personnel Records Center is responsible for processing these records, and at this moment, there is a backlog of more than half a million requests, some dating back to February of 2020. Consequently, some veterans have been waiting for over a year and a half for copies of their service records which are needed to access VA benefits, adjudicate disability claims, request campaign service medals, and much more.

We in the United States of America honor the service and sacrifice of our veterans and Active Duty military personnel, and any delay for them is unacceptable.

That is why we introduced the RECORDS Act, legislation that would compel the National Personnel Records Center to take the necessary actions to eliminate the growing backlog of veterans' record requests.

Dating back more than a year, there has been a broad, bipartisan push to deliver for our veterans and work toward addressing the National Personnel Records Center's unacceptable backlog. The RECORDS Act is an opportunity to achieve this.

Our veterans fought for us. We must always fight for them. I appreciate my colleagues joining me this evening together in support of this goal.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Florida (Mr. RUTHERFORD).

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding, and I thank my good friend from Pennsylvania for this opportunity.

Madam Speaker, I rise today to talk about one of the fundamental roles for a Member of Congress, and that is to help our constituents navigate the Federal bureaucracy and get the documents or benefits that they need and they deserve. This is especially true for veterans, who often run into difficulty at the VA, even when it is not the VA's fault.

Unfortunately, the National Personnel Records Center is still today not fully open, and this is after we gave

them money in last year's appropriations bill to safely reopen during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has prevented caseworkers in my office from properly assisting my constituents in a timely manner.

In fact, there is a backlog that was just mentioned of over 500,000 requests from veterans and their families—over 500,000. To fix this problem, I am proud to support the RECORDS Act, and I urge the Speaker to bring to this bill to the floor.

This bill will ensure that the National Personnel Records Center is operating full time and at fully-staffed capacity now. American veterans deserve better than what they are currently getting from this administration. Let's pass the RECORDS Act.

Mr. KELLER. Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for joining us this evening and so very well put about making sure that we help our veterans and the fact that the records center had the resources in previous legislation. We just need to make sure that they get the job done. I thank the gentleman for joining us.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from Florida (Mrs. CAMMACK).

Mrs. CAMMACK. I rise today, Madam Speaker, to speak in support of the RECORDS Act to make urgently needed reforms to the National Personnel Records Center which has failed our Nation's veterans through a critical time.

I would like to share a recent story from my district about a 99-year-old marine who has been suffering from Alzheimer's. Her family has been attempting to obtain her DD-214 form to apply for her VA pension. This would grant her a placement in a nursing home equipped to handle an Alzheimer's patient. However, the National Personnel Records Center has put an indefinite delay on sending her records to her and her loved ones.

Their justification in writing: this request does not constitute a medical emergency. She is 99 years old. She dedicated her life to serving our country as a marine and is suffering from a debilitating disease. As if this excuse was not poor enough, the center also demanded that the family prove that she has been separated for 60 years or more to justify pulling the records. Again, this is a 99-year-old marine veteran.

The National Personnel Records Center can no longer be allowed to lean on the crutches of COVID. This is their excuse to justify their dereliction of duty. They have an obligation to fulfill these claims for our Nation's veterans who have served our country bravely. If the National Personnel Records Center does their job and still feels no shame in letting veterans' care lapse while their needed records requests go unfulfilled to the tune of 500,000-plus nationally, hundreds within Florida's Third Congressional District—constituents of mine—then it is time for us in Congress to intervene.

Madam Speaker, I urge the House to immediately take up this legislation. Excuses be damned.

□ 2140

Mr. KELLER. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman for those remarks. What an outstanding lady that the gentlewoman represents.

The gentlewoman mentioned something that really makes me think of something when you talk about excuses. I was raised by my grandmother, and I can remember her telling me one time, my brother and I, she looked at us and said: Boys, people that make excuses are weak.

It is time that we show strength, and we make them do their job.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. CLYDE), my good colleague and friend.

Mr. CLYDE. I thank the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. KELLER), my good friend and colleague, for yielding.

Madam Speaker, veterans and their families have made many sacrifices for our great Nation. Through their service, these men and women have earned numerous benefits, and those benefits are validated by the member's individual service record.

The repository for those records is the National Personnel Records Center. The center is behind in its work. With the pandemic, the backlog to obtain military records jumped from 56,000 to over 500,000 requests. That is a tenfold increase.

That is 500,000 veterans and their families who are waiting on documentation that they need to apply for and receive benefits that they earned, including the GI Bill education benefits, VA loans, medical benefits, disability compensation, life insurance, and even burial benefits for their families.

When these issues were first reported last year, the National Personnel Records Center stated that the pandemic prevented their employees from being able to process record requests in a safe environment. As such, Congress appropriated additional funds to address the center's concerns and to help expedite the digitization of records.

However, the center did not grant its employees the proper technology to work from home during the pandemic until early 2021, nearly a year after the pandemic began. This choice by the center only compounded the worsening backlog.

Also, the Archivist of the United States, who oversees the NPRC's operations, noted in his latest correspondence to Congress that he expects the center to eliminate the backlog of veteran requests by the end of fiscal year 2022. That means this time next year, a whole year. This is simply unacceptable.

Each Member of this body has at least one veteran in their district impacted by this backlog, probably many, many veterans. It is time for all of us